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ABSTRACT

In a time of heightened concern for useful integrated studies in U.S. history, Merl Eppse's work is at the forefront of quality material. Unfortunately it has been largely ignored. Merl Eppse was one of the first educators to write a U.S. history textbook that presented the history of U.S. blacks in an integrated manner. He was the head of the Department of History and Political Science at Tennessee A & I State University in Nashville (TN). He wrote three published books about U.S. history with an emphasis on blacks. Eppse's first book, "A Guide to the Study of the Negro in American History," (1937) was designed to accompany Eppse's forthcoming history text, "The Negro, Too, in American History," (1938). In 1939, Eppse co-authored "An Elementary History of America with Contributions of the Negro Race," with A. P. Foster. One reason that Eppse's work could have remained unknown is that the books were published during World War II when the war effort was so all encompassing that many outstanding works were ignored. The second reason is that the topic was ahead of its time. Despite concern for proper inclusion of minorities in U.S. history textbooks, this exclusion still occurs. Eppse's work is so well integrated that it can easily serve as a model for U.S. history textbooks for today's schools. (SM)

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MERL R. EPPSE AND STUDIES OF BLACKS IN AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

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Merl R. Eppse and Studies of Blacks in American History Textbooks

Black studies, black history, Carter G. Woodson, Lerone Benet, W. E. B. Dubois, Saint Clair Drake, Horace Cayton, Kenneth Clark, Jim Banks, Merl Eppse. If this were an ETS exam and educators had to pick one that didn't belong in that list, almost all would pick Merl Eppse. Who is he and why is he on this list? Is his name just a distractor?

In a time of heightened concern for useful integrated (not additive) studies in American history Eppse's work is at the forefront of quality material. Unfortunately it has been largely ignored.

Merl R. Eppse was, for many years, the head of the Department of History and Political Science at Tennessee A & I State University in Nashville and was a faculty member there from 1928 to 1960. Born in 1893 he held a B. A. degree in history and political science from Drake University and before coming to A & I he was a rural school teacher, a World War I Army quartermaster clerk, a most office clerk, a New York City bank clerk and dean of Swift Memorial College in Rogersville, TN.

In 1931 Eppse completed his M. A. at Teachers College, Columbia where he worked with Erling Hunt, Goodwin Watson, George Counts, William Bagley, J. Montgomery Gambril, Mary Townsend, Henry Johnson, Edna Feagley and Mable Carney, among others.

He returned to Teachers College for the 1934-35 school year intending to complete a doctorate (in rural education), but left after one year. At Teachers College his research focus was on the TVA and the Negro, leading to an inquiry in 1935 and in 1936 on Eppse's part to work for the TVA in their Negro education and training program (Eppse, 1935, 1936). In the latter letter he noted his pay was $1,800 for ten months plus a garage, apartment and board. The work at Teachers College led to Eppse's three books which seem to constitute the extent of his easily traced educational publications. This lack of published and indexed work is clearly

important in considering why Eppse, despite his unique contribution to education has been forgotten and ignored academically.

Eppse published in many small "Negro" journals though he submitted articles to Social Education, the Negro History Bulletin (National Association for the Study of Negro Life and History) and the Journal of Negro History. He also wrote for many church publications and was a prolific correspondent.

Among other roles or honors which Merl Eppse held were editor of Christian Plea, a publication of the National Christian Missionary Convention, president of the Tennessee Negro Education Association (1948-49) and member of its executive board from 1947-1960, fellow of the Harmon Foundation and the General Education Board, writer for the Nashville Banner, Secretary-Treasurer of the Association of Social Studies Teachers in Negro Schools and executive board member of the National Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

A grand nephew (on his mother's side) of Hiram Rhodes Revels, first Negro United States Senator from Mississippi, Eppse had many students at A & I who went on to greater fame. These included Carl Rowan, former ambassador to Finland, head of the United States Information Agency and newspaper columnist; Cecil Partee, an Illinois state senator; Billy Jones, a municipal judge in East Saint Louis, Illinois; Edward Porter, an Oklahoma legislator and Judge Luther Glanton of Des Moines.

At his death in 1967 Eppse, an admired campus figure in his more than thirty years at Tennessee A & I was described by Dr. Walter S. Davis, A & I president as "one of the most effective teachers we've had in pre-legal education (and) .... one of the most inspirational teachers in the history of the University." (Nashville Banner, 1967). Davis noted that, "Dr. Eppse's death removes from the scene one to whom the young Negro interested in law and the history of the Negro might turn for reliable information." (Nashville Banner, 1967).

Merl Eppse was one of, if not the first, educator to author an American history textbook for school use that presented the history of blacks in the United States in an integrated manner. Even today this kind of approach is called for by many educators, yet has not been achieved to the degree that Eppse's books did over forty years ago.

Eppse's contributions have gone largely unnoticed and unrecognized. His work was modeled in a sense on that of Carter G. Woodson whom he clearly admired greatly. Eppse, through, wrote for school children and constructed the aforementioned integrative approach to American history rather than simply presenting the history of blacks.

The work of Merl R. Eppse

Merl Eppse wrote three published books, all on American history with particular emphasis on blacks in that history. His papers located in the Tennessee State Library and archives indicate that a fourth book was planned. In January of 1939 he claimed to be working on "What a Negro Citizen Should Know," but that was never completed. (Eppse, 1939) Those papers consist of nearly 300 catalogued, but unexamined boxes of materials on subjects such as race relations, world affairs, communism, the Negro Business Institute, Negro organizations and materials from Tennessee A & I.

Eppse's papers contain class papers written at Teachers College that foreshadowed his later books. One, undated, is on "The aim and process of teaching history in a Negro Teachers College." Eppse sees this as unique because "in the South Negroes are not permitted in libraries, most parks, theatres, to hold office, to vote, to discuss vital issues... It is "no wonder that Negro teachers of the South possess a 'slave' mind blind to all of the democratic principles which we possess." (Eppse, n.d., 11).

Eppse was acutely aware of Jim Crow, but he also believed strongly in the Constitution, the democratic process and political acumen. He worked for many

state and local candidates and issues and this work was acknowledged by letters of thanks from mayors, congressmen, governors and state legislators. Eppse was not tolerant of student hangers on. In the just noted paper he noted that "The one controlling slogan in all Negro schools should be 'Learn or Perish.'" (Eppse, n.d., 16)

In a paper prepared for the National Conference on Fundamental Problems in the Education of Negroes (held in May 1934) entitled "Citizenship and the Education of the Negro", Eppse reported Negro schooling data reported to Dr. Thomas Jessee Jones, Commissioner of the Office of Education and went on to give citizenship involvement "tips." Eppse observed that "Color race prejudice did not start until after the French Revolution. It is not strong in most if the world today." (Eppse, 1934, 31).

One of Eppse's first books was entitled The Negro, Too, in American History, (1938) and probably grew out of his Teachers College work since he acknowledges "Dr. Mary E. Townsend, Dr. Erling Hunt, Dr. Henry Johnson and Miss Edna Feagley (who) have guided my research work for two years ....." (Eppse, 1938, viii).

Clearly Eppse labored under the pressures of the late depression and the guilt he seemed to feel for blacks who spoke out or acted out against America.

> In the short space of a few years, sentiment has changed wonderfully in favor of the good that the Negro has done as a whole, rather than to emphasize the bad that a few have done. This book will present a continuous story of contributions of the Negro, realizing at all times that mutual understanding and helpfulness were at the core of this relationship, and if America is ever to be the place that it was intended to be by our founding fathers, then the same core of objectives must be uppermost in the minds of all of us as a guiding principle of our lives. (xi).

Eppse's volume is presented in twelve chapters of history from "The People of Africa" (Chapter I) to "The outlook - (A Summary of What is True to Present Time)" (Chapter III). Eppse begins by describing Africa's climate, topography, resources, wildlife and peoples. Eppse introduces and destroys stereotypes throughout the chapter and book, many of which relate to the "basic" character flaws of blacks.

> While we have heard that he is black because he is cursed; that he is poor because he is physically weak; that he is not thrifty because he revels in idleness, these are all false statements because, when we study Africa, and its climate and people we find that it is only a matter of a people living the life that is lived in their native home. (5).

In subsequent chapters Eppse traces American history with integrated information on black contributions. For example the chapter on "European Explorations and Discoveries" presents Alonzo Pietro, the black captain of Columbus's Nina as well as Dorantes and Estevanio, the latter the discoverer of New Mexico and Arizona in 1527. "As early as 1528, there were about 10,000 Negros in the New World" (35).

Eppse concluded the body of the text with summary data breaking down the 1930 Negro population (11,891,143) into professions (app. 101,000 of whom 55,000 were teachers). Life span was 46 years with the death rate of 17.5/thousand v. 10.8/thousand for whites. Appendixes included 1) important events and dates about Negroes 2) the Declaration of Independence 3) the text of the Constitution (Article I, Section 9) and 21 amendments 4) Reading material for each chapter 5) Lynchings of whites and Negroes 1882-1936 from Negro Yearbook 1937-1938 6) Presidents of the United States 7) Vice Presidents of the United States 8) President's Cabinet as of 1938 9) Emancipation Proclamation 10) Andrew Jackson's will leaving various slaves to relatives 11) First Negro churches organized 12) statistics for Negro churches 13) free and slave Negro population of the United States 1790-1860, by

states with migration, urbanization, home aid Negro town settlement data. In 1930 the median Negro family was 3.15, for native whites 3.34. 14) Trends of the occupations of Negroes for the forty year period 1890-1930 with dates of establishment of public school systems in southern state enrollment of Negroes in public schools, Negro institutions. Much of the educational data seems to have been drawn from research compiled by the Julius Rosenwald Fund. Fred McCuiston's work from 1930 is one example.15) patriotic songs - America 16) Lyrics to Star Spangled Banner, Swing Low, Lift Every Voice and Sing (Negro National anthem), I Ain't Goin't Study War No More, I Couldn't Hear Nobody Play, Steal Away, Go Down Moses, Deep River 17) Decline in the number of Negro presidential appointments 1912 to 1937. The book totals 544 pages including index.

Eppse's first book was "not intended as a textbook or a reference book, but a guidebook - a manual suggesting various sources and activities by which the history of the Negro may become a more vivid and worthwhile subject for study in schools on the high school and college level." (Eppse, 1943a,7). The book, A Guide to the Study of the Negro in American History was meant to accompany Eppse's forthcoming (1938) history text, but he asserted in the forward that it could be used with any good textbook. Eppse's papers cause confusion as to the actual publication date of this work. Because he felt his books would have a difficult time being published by "mainstream" publishers, he worked with a book distributer named W. Louis Davis of Chicago and Nashville in the formation of the National Educational Publishing company. Davis became president, Eppse chairman of the advisory board. Thus many of Eppse's incoming letters are to the company.

Letters from 1938 and 1937 refer to Eppse's guide which is listed in the National Union Catalog with 1937, 1943 and 1949 editions. C. L. Barron wrote for the Louisiana State Board of Education that they were "planning to make some provision for this book to be used in the negro schools in the state next session" (Barron, 1937). Eppse's vita (SIC) States the book was written in 1943. (Eppse, 1959).

Eppse's one page, "How to use the guide" (10) includes objectives, (tips) to the student that note his inclusion of advance organizers, (points) for the teacher. Tip 4 was intriguing in recommending, "Read the biographies of men and women. You will soon find out that this is a man-made world." What did he mean by this --women, keep your place, women have been historically repressed, or was it just a meaningless aside?

The guide's first twelve chapters correspond precisely to Eppse's textbook except that the presentation is in outline form with chapter bibliographies. Chapter XIII is an update, "The Negro from 1938 to 1943". Eppse's questions and exercises were thought provoking, higher order, action-oriented.

In 1939 Eppse co-authored An Elementary History of America with Contributions of the Negro Race with A. P. Foster, the recording secretary of the Tennessee Historical Society. Later editions were issued in 1943, 1949 and 1953. This was quite similar to The Negro, Too,..., but was intended for a younger audience, probably Junior High School. In the forward the authors see their book as "an attempt to help America solve one of her most complex problems -- the relation between the white race and the Negro race". (Eppse and Foster, 1943, v.) The book's ten chapters correspond pretty much to Eppse's previous volumes. Both textbooks contain much interesting, unappreciated data, e.g. the list of all Negro senators and congressman up to that time.

Eppse was aided in at least one of his publishing ventures by the Julius Rosenwald Fund which also deserves more investigation. The fund aided the Chicago Negro YMCA and helped erect 5357 schools. According to Eppse "between 25 and 40% of all Negro elementary children in school in 1932 were in Rosenwald buildings." (Eppse and Foster, 209). A letter from the president of the Rosenwald Fund acknowledged receipt of Eppse's work and his impression with it. (Embree, 1937)

The Mystery of Eppse's Recognition

The question remains unanswered, "Why was Eppse so unknown?" I've asked professors of black studies, historians of black Americans and of American education and not one recognized his name. What reasons could account for such a slight considering the outstanding contributions of Merl Eppse?

I have three key reasons for the status of Eppse's writings. First was the time that the books were published, during World War II. Paper was short, publicity must have been minimal and the war effort was so all encompassing that many outstanding works were ignored. David Tyack saw this as the reason that Richard Wright's 12 Million Black Voices went universally unrecognized (Tyack, 1987).

It's not as if Eppse himself did not try to promote his material. He wrote to state and city boards of education as well as various foundations and individuals seeking support for or use of his textbooks. According to his vita, The Negro, Too, in American History was "adopted by 9 states, many cities, counties and school districts." (Eppse, 1959) Letters in his papers attest to that. The Chicago public schools adopted it in 1949 (Atkins, 1949) as did Philadelphia, Detroit and New York City. Barrow's letter indicated Louisiana adoption and letters from correspondents in Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Cincinnati (which still had negro schools in 1947), Texas and Alabama indicate use in those places. In addition Eppse offered many people a $1 commission on each book sold for $3 if they would agree to help promote the book.

A second reason was that the topic itself was simply ahead of its time. Despite concern for proper inclusion of minorities in American histories, this exclusion still occurs. Even today there are those who see the study of black history or women's history as less legitimate areas of study. Eppse's topic in the 1930's and 40's failed to generate much interest because of societal prejudice against black history as a field of study. Eppse's books were adopted officially by nine states which was encouraging, but I would doubt that they were used in any but black schools in the segregated school systems of the 1930's and 40's.

In the forty or so years since, of course, the field has become legitimized by not only the writings of black historians like Lerone Benet or black educators like Jim Banks, but also white educational historians like David Tyack and Meyer Weinberg.

Eppse was active in many negro associations and was well known among black colleges for his writing and professional involvement. Because of that he received invitations from many such colleges and high schools to speak during negro history week or at graduations. He worked to improve the network of communications between and among social science faculty at black colleges in his work with the Association of Social Studies Teachers in negro schools.

During the 1940's Eppse wrote to many people seeking the names of social science teachers in various black public schools. In return letters to Eppse many views of black educators regarding individuals and organizations are revealed. For example, the head of the department of history of the public schools of Washington, D.C., criticized the one white member of the Association of Negro Life and History as well as Thomas Jessee Jones (former U.S. Commissioner of Education and head of Hampton Institute in Virginia) as exploiters of negroes in order to rise in the white world. Otherwise, it was felt, they and others would never have been know. (Brewer, 1958).

Eppse sought to develop black pride in his students. They researched and wrote of black leaders in Nashville, outstanding black Americans and national black educators, all assignments in a negro history class. Eppse's work was read by well known blacks in other fields. John Johnson, Editor and Publisher of Ebony and Negro Digest wrote to Eppse declining an invitation to a workshop, but having enjoyed Eppse's book.

> Having been denied the privilege of studying negro history in my high school and college days, I have had to pick up most of my information on the subject in a rather

> desultory fashion and therefore have a keen appreciation for the valuable contribution which you are making in teaching young people the history and the accomplishment of our racial group.

Another reason for the lack of recognition was Eppse himself. First he was black and consciously or subconsciously many academicians were not about to accept the work of just any black. Eppse himself compounded this prejudice by failing to publish in "mainstream" educational journals and thus, weakening his reputation academically.

Part of the reason for that is that it appears that Eppse did little primary research. He was a translator, a conduit, an interpreter. That is entirely legitmate, but taken at that time along with the other factors mentioned, this became an additional reason for ignoring the content and quality of his work.

Eppse's importance is not simply a matter of curiousity. The primacy of his approach deserves recognition, but there is more than simply just desserts. Eppse's work is so well integrated that it can easily serve as a model for American history textbooks for today's schools.

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